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ABSTRACT

Although the application and acceptance of qualitative research have increased over the last decade, there is little empirical information about how one should learn qualitative methods. This paper describes a reflective strategy for learning the methods of qualitative research that draws on experience in a graduate qualitative methods course and explores reflections prior to, during, and following the course. Reflection appeared to be a valuable approach to learning qualitative research methods. (SLD)

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# A Reflective Strategy for Learning the Methods of Qualitative Research

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## Abstract

The application and (acceptance) of qualitative research has increased over the last decade. In response, numerous text and courses have been developed in the vein of "how to conduct qualitative research." However, empirical information with regard to "how one should learn qualitative methods" is scant. It is reasonable to assume that learning strategies are tenable for qualitative instruction.

Herein, a "reflective" strategy for learning the methods of qualitative research is described. The author's experiences in a graduate qualitative methods course provided the impetus. The author's reflections (a) prior to, (b) during, and (c) following the course are referenced to illustrate how one might profit from a reflective approach. (Note that guidelines for reflection within the context of learning qualitative methods are appended.)

While the use of "reflection" is not new to education (or qualitative methods for that matter) the application herein is thought to be unique. Based on the author's experience, it is expected that instructors and students of qualitative research will profit from this learning strategy. It is the author's belief that reflection enhances the learning of qualitative research methods.


## Introduction

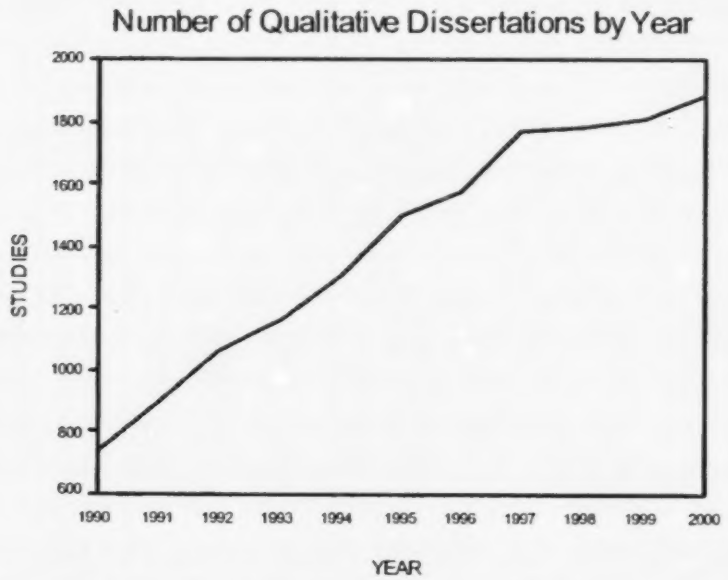
The summer of 2002, I took a graduate course in qualitative research methods. Up to that point, I had no experience with qualitative research. Drawing from my background in English, I thought it might be useful to capture my experiences in a reflective journal. At the end of the course, I discovered that journaling led to the following insights: (1) I learned about a new paradigm, (2) I learned about the importance of networking, (3) I finally bought into the idea of emergence, and (4) I stopped trying to start at the end. I realized that if I had not kept the journal, I would have not had those insights.

I was curious if there was already a formal reflection process for learning qualitative research methods. Subsequently, I conducted a cursory review of online syllabi for qualitative courses. To my surprise, I found no mention of using reflection to improve the learning of qualitative research methods. I was inspired to create an

instructional module aimed at using reflection to improve the learning of qualitative research methods.

## Increased Application of Qualitative Research Methods

During the last decade, qualitative research has matured. Trends such as increased application, innovations and refinements regarding methodology, and increased application have been occurring. A search of Dissertation Abstractions International on the keywords "qualitative research" for the years 1990 - 2000 returned 14,836 hits. The data showed a drastic increase in application that could lead one to infer that there has been an increase in acceptance due to the fact that dissertations are chaired. In the ten-year span, the number of qualitative dissertations rose from 746 to 1888 (Retrieved September 2002).



According to Bogdan and Bilken (1998):

> There is more enthusiasm for the [qualitative] approach now than ever before. Qualitative research can no longer be considered a marginal approach that mainstream researchers do not have to consider seriously. The number of sessions at the recent meetings of the American Educational Research Association reporting on qualitative research has increased dramatically (p. ix).

## Strategies for Learning Qualitative Research Methods

Self-study texts and organized class work are two popular strategies for learning qualitative research methods. Texts, such as *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (1998) are often used in qualitative research classes. This sample textbook is segmented into 7 chapters as follows: (1) Foundations of Qualitative Research in Education: An Introduction; (2) Research Design; (3) Fieldwork; (4) Qualitative Data; (5) Data Analysis; (6) Writing It Up; and (7) Applied Qualitative Research for Education.

An advanced Google search with the key words "qualitative research" "methods" and "syllabus" resulted in a hit of 23, 600. None of the syllabi or course descriptions that were randomly selected contained a section on personal reflection.

## Reflection as a Strategy for Learning

A cursory view of qualitative research method web pages did not turn up any mention of any use of a reflective approach. I found it odd given that reflection is widely used in educational contexts, that neither self-study texts nor formal classroom work (or a

combination of the two) suggested using reflection. Based on my experience (opinion) reflection enhances the learning of qualitative research methods.

Based on my review of the literature herein and my discoveries learning qualitative research methods, I have written an instructional module titled "Using Reflection to Enhance the Learning of Qualitative Methods" formatted as slides. The intent is to serve as a generic template that instructors can use and either reduce or expand the content. It is expected that instructors of qualitative research will customize the module to fit their course goals, objectives etc… so they can be adapted to existing courses for qualitative research methods.

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## Author Note

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**Using Reflection to Enhance the Learning of Qualitative Methods**

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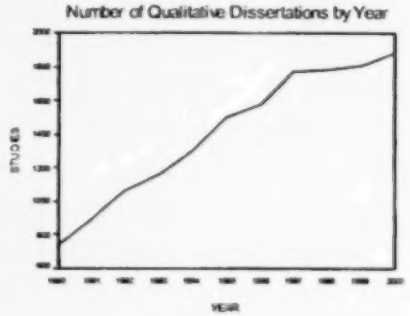
Number of Qualitative Dissertations by Year




## Reflection
**(Multiple Perspective Concept)**

- Reflection is "a thought, idea, or opinion formed or remark made as a result of meditation" (Merriam-Webster, 10th ed.).
- "Reflection is concentration and careful consideration" (Osterman, 1990, p.134).

## Reflection
**(Multiple Perspective Concept)**

- Critical reflection blends learning through experience with theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge constructions and new behaviors or insights (Stein,2000)
- Reflection is necessary for long-term memory reinforcement. Its absence in the learning process can be likened to chewing-but not swallowing. The food is tasted, but unless it is digested, there is no nutritional value.... (Marshall, 2001)

## Reflection
**(Multiple Perspective Concept)**

John Dewey phrased this concept in a formula:
**Experience + Reflection = Growth**

"...while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn to think well, especially how to acquire the general habit of reflecting" (Dewey)

## Reflection
**(Uses)**

- Therapy (psycho-analysis)
- Pastime (journal keeping)
- Learning
- Method of Qualitative Research
- Dialogue Journal (evaluation)
- Professional Development (reflective practice)

"By increasing self-awareness, the reflective process creates opportunities for continued professional growth" (Osterman, 1990, p. 137).



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## Reflection
## As a Strategy for Learning

- **Benefits**

Enhances communication between teacher and student

Assessment of learner needs and progress

Aids in written expression

- **Weaknesses**

Lack of consistent way to measure the depth and outcome of critical reflection (Kember et al,1999)

Reflective practice involves much self-reflection on the part of the teacher.

## Reflection

"By emphasizing the importance of ideas and the subjective aspects of personal experience, reflective practice rejects certain aspects of the scientific tradition and suggests the need to develop new ways of knowing"

(Osterman, 1990, p. 141).

## Reflection
## As a Method of Qualitative Research

Distinctions become more evident when one compares reflection for learning with reflection as qualitative inquiry

Reflective field notes may be kept in the form of a journal, but they are subjective comments on the objective observations.

You may speculate about what you think you are learning in the study and what the outcome of the study may be, but this journal is not intended for therapy rather "the purpose of this reflection is to improve the notes" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.123).

## Reflection
## (contrast)

- **Method of QR**

The observer's journal should contain reflections on analysis, method, ethical dilemmas and conflicts, observer's frame of mind,and points of clarification (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998)

- **Method of Learning**

In contrast, the personal reflections are specifically about what students are learning during the course of the class.

## Reflection as a Strategy for Learning Qualitative Methods

- Adaptable in form and purpose, journals as a means of learning and reflection have both a long history and a strong set of contemporary advocates (Fulwiler, 1987)

- **Approach**

Reflect prior to, during, and after course (class).

Use guiding questions

Try to reflect at regular intervals at the same time

Use a contrast pattern of development (previous class vs. current class)

## Guiding Questions

- To be handed out before each class

Examples from author's reflections excerpts:

1. Do you consider yourself a positivist or postpositivist? (beginning)
2. What have you learned from this class? (compare/contrast at different points in class)
3. How is reflection working for you? (Evaluation of process)

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## Guiding Reflection

"A good way to promote reflection at the end of a class period is for students to keep a daily learning log. Students jot down at least one thought they had as a result of the lesson and explain the significance of the thought. Helpful prompt questions are, 'What did I learn today?' 'What do I need to work on tomorrow?' In what did I do well?' and 'What could I have done differently?' The questions are often more valuable than the answers".

(Marshall, 2001, p. 1)

## Course Requirements/Expectations

- **Materials** Format for reflections (typewritten, notebooks, electronically, email interaction)
- **Evaluation** Will reflections be reviewed by instructor or peers? And how will they be evaluated?
- **Frequency** When will reflections be collected?
- **Length** Minimum requirement?

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